

**A SYSTEMATIC EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS  
OF TWO PRE-WRITING APPROACHES  
ON FIRST GRADE STUDENTS**

**MASTER'S PROJECT**

**Submitted to the School of Education,  
University of Dayton, in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Science in Education**

**by**

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## DEDICATION

To my husband, Lloyd, for all of his love, support,  
and patience. And to my parents, who have always loved  
and encouraged me in all of my endeavors.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM**

#### **Purpose for the Study**

Because first grade students are emergent writers, it is the responsibility of the first grade teacher to help these students see themselves as authors and build their self-confidence. A teacher needs to provide an environment that is rich in content and then prompt the students to explore new ideas through writing (Staab and Smith, 1985). Teachers must use a variety of techniques and methods to motivate all students to write, because what is meaningful for one student may not be meaningful to another. Teachers can take advantage of the students' natural urge to write if they convince the students that their lives are worth writing about (Calkins, 1986).

When a writing assignment is too structured, the writing process can be inhibited. Educators discourage the students' natural urge to write when they prompt students with synthetic writing stimulants (Calkins, 1986). Students are often taught to write using tasks that are presented in isolation, and lack a real purpose for the students (Juliebö and Edwards, 1989).

The writer's school district was in the process of restructuring its language arts curriculum to include a holistic approach to the evaluation of student writing skills. For this reason, it was necessary to research current methods of assessment and evaluation.

## **Problem Statement**

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the written composition skills exhibited as well as verbal and/or non-verbal behavior of first grade students after they had been exposed to two different pre-writing approaches.

## **Assumptions**

In drafting this proposal, the writer made a number of assumptions. First, it was assumed that students would honestly answer all questions asked during the semi-structured interviews. Second, it was assumed that students would perform to the best of their ability during each writing session. Third, it was assumed that all observers would remain unbiased in their assessment of student performance and observation of verbal and non-verbal behavior exhibited during the writing sessions. Fourth, it was assumed that the subject matter of the pre-writing prompt used would not bias the results of the test due to differing personal life experiences. Fifth, it was assumed that the evaluation tools would measure what they were designed to measure. In other words, the techniques discussed were an accurate measure of a pre-writing approaches effectiveness. Finally, it was assumed that the time of day during which the test was given would have a uniform effect on student performance.



## **Limitations**

In drafting this proposal, the writer recognized a number of limitations. First, the test group was small (only 24 students). A larger group would have provided more substantive results. Second, a total of two samples were taken for data collection; one with each pre-writing approach. A greater number of writing samples from each student, with the differing pre-writing approaches, would have provided more conclusive results. Finally, student performance might have been effected by the presence of observers in the classroom during each writing session.

## **Definition of Terms**

**Assessment** is the first step in the evaluation process. It refers to data collection (Routman, 1991).

**Evaluation** refers to the collection of data as well as the interpretation and application of data (Routman, 1991)

**Holistic Assessment** refers to a procedure for judging a piece of writing as a whole rather than counting individual errors (Wangberg and Reutten, 1986).

**Invented Spelling** refers to a child's attempt to spell a word on his/her own. The child listens for the different sounds in a word and then chooses letters that represent these sounds (Temple, Nathan, Burris, and Temple, 1982).

**Off-Task Behavior** is that behavior the student may exhibit other than writing.

**On-Task Behavior** is that behavior exhibited by the student while he/she is actively engaged in writing.

**Prompt** refers to the “story starter” that is given to the students prior to the writing exercise. Following the prompt, the students are asked to focus their writing sample on the subject matter of the prompt.

**Traditional Approach to Writing** advocates teaching language as isolated individual skills.

**Whole Language Approach to Writing** advocates teaching language as a whole connected process.

**Writing Process** is a systematic approach to writing which involves the following stages: rehearsal (pre-writing), drafting (writing), revision, proofreading, and editing (post writing), and publishing (Anderson, 1992).

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

In this chapter, the review of related literature is divided into three categories. Under the first sub-heading, the writer discusses the developmental process of emergent writers. Under the second sub-heading, the writer discusses various techniques which may be used to implement meaningful writing experiences in the classroom. Under the third sub-heading, the writer discusses various methods used by educators to assess and evaluate student writing samples.

#### **Developmental Process of Writing**

All organisms grow through orderly processes toward an already pre-determined form (Bissex, 1981). Children learn to speak and write by going through systematic growth processes. Teachers can best help young children grow as writers when they understand some of the sequences that occur in the primary grades (Calkins, 1986).

Bissex identifies three principles of language development. The first principle is that children learn to speak and write by interacting with an environment that is rich in language. Just as infants learn to talk by talking, young children learn to write by writing. The second principle of language development, is that children best learn language when they are around people who respond content, not just context; in other words, the child's

grammar is not immediately corrected. By responding primarily to the content of what a child says, the adult is encouraging the child to continue his/her efforts in speaking and writing. As a child matures, his/her grammar will continue to develop. According to Bissex, the third principle of language development is that language grows from being telegraphic toward elaboration and explicitness. For example, a child may say, "Dog," but actually mean to say, "I hear a dog barking." Telegraphic speech is when children speak in one or two word sentences, saying only the concrete words. These three principles of spoken language can also be applied to learning written language. Children go through the same growth processes (Bissex, 1981).

Marie Clay describes the process in which children move from non-writing to writing in four stages. She also refers to these stages as principles (Temple, Nathan, Burris, and Temple, 1988). The Recurring Principle is a child's early attempt to imitate writing by drawing a series of sticks and loops repeatedly. The Generative Principle is a child's attempt to imitate writing by repeating the same characters over and over, but the arrangement of these characters differs. The Flexibility Principle is a child's attempt to form actual letters. The Linear Principle describes the manner in which a child discovers the importance of directionality. In other words, children now realize that print is read left to right, and from top to bottom (Temple, Nathan, Burris, and Temple, 1988).

Lucy Calkins describes the systematic growth processes of first-grade

writers. She refers to the first stage as "Rehearsal." This is when a child draws a picture and then dictates a story about the picture. Children in this stage have no sense of audience. In the "Drafting" stage, children begin to write using only the initial consonant sound to represent a word. After a period of time, students are able to write the ending consonant sound as well.

Eventually, they are able to write all of the sounds they hear in a word.

During the "Revision" stage, children learn quickly that they can add on to a story. Adding on is the most common form of revision. The last stage is

"Editing." This is when children realize they are capable of self-evaluation.

During this stage, students acquire the habit of re-reading their work.

Children need to learn that writing is an on-going process. Therefore, the earlier children begin to write, the better. Writing, like anything else is a skill that improves with practice (Beemer and Grippando, 1992). From day one, first -grade students should actively engage in writing. In the beginning of the year, the writing is more informal. Students practice invented spellings, while writing in journals. Later in the year, students have an actual writing folder containing several rough drafts. They learn more about webbing, punctuation, spelling, and self-editing. By the end of the year, they are using beginner dictionaries and self-correcting errors. Over the course of the school year, their writing becomes more formal (Beemer and Grippando, 1992). Graves states that all writers follow the same pattern: select - compose - read, select - compose - read, and so on. Educators who understand the

development and on-going process of writing are better able to effectively teach writing (Graves, 1983).

One way an educator can see the various patterns of development in an individual is to simply study that student's journal entries over a period of time (Kintisch, 1986). Generally speaking, a first-grade student begins the year by drawing pictures in his/her journal. As time goes by, the student's invented spelling improves. By the end of the year, first-grade students write in a more conventional manner (Routman, 1991).

Publishing a student's work product contributes significantly to a student's development as an emergent writer. Publishing produces tangible evidence that a student is making progress (Graves, 1983). Publishing allows children the opportunity to share their writing with a variety of audiences. Publishing should be a natural part of the writing process, because when children know their work will be read by various audiences, they have an incentive to become authors. Publishing motivates students to improve and develop their writing (Anderson, 1992).

### **Techniques Used to Implement Writing**

One technique used to implement writing is to make each child a resident expert on a particular topic of interest to that child. According to Graves, when a student can write about what he or she knows best, the student feels successful (Klein, 1989). Eventually, each child will become a

resident expert on a certain subject. Children soon learn who is an expert, and on what topics, through shared readings. At this point, they can collaborate and help each other. Given the opportunity to pursue their own interests in writing, students have responsibility for their own learning (Klein, 1989).

Another technique to implement writing is to create a designated writing center in one part of the classroom. This center should be well stocked with items such as: stationery, pencils, pens, markers, lined and unlined paper, small pictures, scissors, glue stick, picture dictionary, and wall paper sample books (Meagher, 1986). Students should know where the writing supplies are kept, and when and where they may write. In other words, the classroom should be "user friendly" (Routman, 1991). When students have a sense of order, there are fewer discipline problems, and a routine is established (Graves, 1983). A writing center creates an ideal opportunity for teachers to observe the level of development of a writer (Juliebö and Edwards, 1989).

Because whole language classrooms use space differently than traditional classrooms, space for whole class, small group, and individual work, must exist. Furniture must be placed strategically around the room so materials are easily accessible and students can interact (Anderson, 1992). By organizing the classroom in such a manner, a teacher can actively promote writing.

A fourth technique used to implement writing is webbing. Webbing is a method that organizes content around a theme or topic (Staab and Smith, 1985). A web is a plan of possibilities that creates and incorporates meaningful experiences. By using a web, a student creates questions, and then seeks answers (Staab and Smith, 1985).

Another technique is for a teacher to provide direct experiences to stimulate student writing. A teacher must enlarge the range of experiences in the childrens' daily lives where the need to write arises, because the children are directly involved (Juliebö and Edwards, 1989). The range of experiences can be broadened simply by having a class pet, showing a video, or going on a field trip, for example. Children have to learn that they can write about their own experiences (Friedman, 1985). Graves says that children must learn to choose what they want to write about, and direct experiences allows self-selection.

A sixth technique is to use childrens' literature to stimulate writing. Juliebö and Edwards suggest several ways in which childrens' literature may be used to implement writing:

- add text to wordless books
- make posters about favorite books
- write letters to authors or illustrators
- design book jackets
- arrange an author visit
- write a poem or song about a favorite character

The writer has an "Author of the Month" display in her classroom. Each month, students learn about a particular author/illustrator's life, and his



or her writing style. The students compare and contrast books and discuss what they like specifically about the "Author of the Month." The students enjoy writing about these authors/illustrators in their journals, and sharing their discoveries.

### **Assessment and Evaluation of Writing**

Because writing is subjective, it is difficult for a teacher to assess a composition objectively. In a whole language classroom, teachers and students work together to evaluate writing assignments as a whole (Varble, 1990). One method of evaluation is to collect and analyze student writing samples. Before a teacher evaluates a student's composition, he or she must first set up a criteria to follow. Varble suggests two separate categories for evaluation. The first one deals with the quality and content of writing, while the second criteria deals with the mechanics of writing.

Wangberg and Reutten suggest using a holistic approach to evaluating student writing. With holistic evaluation, an educator can judge a piece of writing without marking individual errors. By utilizing this method, two benefits are achieved: decreased grading time, and students receive a graded paper that is free of "red marks." Holistic scoring is quick and systematic (Wangberg and Reutten, 1986). In a study conducted by Wangberg and Reutten, holistic scoring of writing samples was found to be a reliable method of assessment in the whole language classroom.

Informal assessments can be effective when evaluating the student's writing ability. During informal assessments, teachers gather information in a variety of ways. This information is collected through student observations, anecdotal records, student interviews, and student work samples. These methods provide tangible evidence of a student's work progress. Because informal assessment varies throughout the school year, a teacher can focus on several different student behaviors (Strickland and Morrow, 1989). This allows a teacher the opportunity to take all students' cultural, diverse backgrounds, and abilities into consideration. By using many methods of assessment over a period of time, teachers can get a more accurate picture of a student's strengths and weaknesses (Routman, 1991). Informal assessment can be more time consuming than giving a single test, however, the information gathered is more useful and valuable (Powell and Hornsby, 1993). A writing skills checklist is a quick and easy way for teachers to monitor student progress. Students can be taught to use a checklist for self-evaluation (Anderson, 1992).

In the past, evaluation focused only on the final draft, however, when implementing the writing process, it is important to evaluate a student's progress every step of the way (McKensie and Tompkins, 1984). Evaluation should be an on-going process integrating the whole writing experience. During the pre-writing stage, a teacher should see if the student has developed a sense of audience. In the drafting stage, students learn to focus

on content. When a student is in the revising stage, he or she reads the composition to classmates, who in turn respond to the writing. During the editing stage, student and teacher work together to correct mechanical errors. Once a student publishes, the teacher makes sure the author shares his or her story with the appropriate audience (McKensie and Tompkins, 1984).

McKensie and Tompkins suggest using an Integrated Evaluation Checklist to evaluate how well students understand the writing process.

## CHAPTER III

### PROCEDURE

#### Subjects

The study was conducted with 24 first grade students. There were a total of 13 boys and 11 girls who participated.

#### Setting

School. The setting for the study was an elementary school where the majority of the student population belongs to the middle or upper-middle socioeconomic class.

Community. The school is located in a suburban school district near Columbus, Ohio. In this district, there are approximately 6650 students.

#### Data Collection

Construction of the Data Base. First, data was collected by gathering two writing samples from each student. When analyzing the writing samples, the writer reviewed the following: total number of words, total number of invented spellings, remains focused on topic, organized/logical sequence. This information is presented in the tables found in the Appendix. Second, data was collected through observation by a third party during each 15-minute writing session. During the time allotted for writing, the observer

would systematically observe each student and record information indicating whether the student was on or off task. The observer would watch each student for approximately five seconds and then move on to the next student. This procedure was followed for the duration of each session. Data collected by the observer is included in the Appendix. Third, data was collected during a semi-structured interview with each student. These interviews were conducted immediately following the second writing session. Students were asked the following questions:

1. Which pre-writing approach did you prefer? Why?
2. Do you think you are a good writer? Why/Why not?
3. Do you like to write? Why/Why not?

Student answers and comments are also included in the Appendix.

Administration of the Data Base. The writer read orally to the class the directions for each 15-minute writing session. For the first session, the writer gave the students a prompt and then instructed the students to write only about the prompt. The writer used the following prompt:

One day, you were walking home from school. As you got closer to your house, you noticed something sitting in the middle of your driveway. It was a huge box with your name on it. What happens next?

For the second 15-minute writing session, the writer instructed the students to write about anything they chose.

**TABLE 1**  
**STUDENT WRITING SAMPLE ANALYSIS**  
**TOTAL NUMBER OF WORDS**

(A - Always; O - Occasionally; N - Never)

STUDENT	PROMPT	NO PROMPT	GAIN/LOSS
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			

TABLE 1 CONTINUED

STUDENT WRITING SAMPLE ANALYSIS

TOTAL NUMBER OF WORDS

(A - Always; O - Occasionally; N - Never)

STUDENT	PROMPT	NO PROMPT	GAIN/LOSS
13			
14			
15			
16			
17			
18			
19			
20			
21			
22			
23			
24			

**TABLE 2**

**STUDENT WRITING SAMPLE ANALYSIS  
TOTAL NUMBER OF INVENTED SPELLINGS**

**(A - Always; O - Occasionally; N - Never)**

<b>STUDENT</b>	<b>PROMPT</b>	<b>NO PROMPT</b>	<b>GAIN/LOSS</b>
<b>1</b>			
<b>2</b>			
<b>3</b>			
<b>4</b>			
<b>5</b>			
<b>6</b>			
<b>7</b>			
<b>8</b>			
<b>9</b>			
<b>10</b>			
<b>11</b>			
<b>12</b>			



**TABLE 2 CONTINUED**  
**STUDENT WRITING SAMPLE ANALYSIS**  
**TOTAL NUMBER OF INVENTED SPELLINGS**

(A - Always; O - Occasionally; N - Never)

STUDENT	PROMPT	NO PROMPT	GAIN/LOSS
13			
14			
15			
16			
17			
18			
19			
20			
21			
22			
23			
24			

**TABLE 3**

**WRITING SAMPLE ANALYSIS  
REMAINS FOCUSED ON TOPIC/MAIN IDEA**

**(A - Always; O - Occasionally; N - Never)**

STUDENT	PROMPT			NO PROMPT		
	A*	O*	N*	A*	O*	N*
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7						
8						
9						
10						
11						
12						

**TABLE 3 CONTINUED**

**WRITING SAMPLE ANALYSIS  
REMAINS FOCUSED ON TOPIC/MAIN IDEA**

(A - Always; O - Occasionally; N - Never)

STUDENT	PROMPT			NO PROMPT		
	A *	O*	N*	A *	O*	N*
13						
14						
15						
16						
17						
18						
19						
20						
21						
22						
23						
24						

**TABLE 4**

**WRITING SAMPLE ANALYSIS  
ORGANIZED (LOGICAL SEQUENCE)**

**(A - Always; O - Occasionally; N - Never)**

STUDENT	PROMPT			NO PROMPT		
	A*	O*	N*	A*	O*	N*
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7						
8						
9						
10						
11						
12						

TABLE 4 CONTINUED

WRITING SAMPLE ANALYSIS  
ORGANIZED (LOGICAL SEQUENCE)

(A - Always; O - Occasionally; N - Never)

STUDENT	PROMPT			NO PROMPT		
	A *	O *	N *	A *	O *	N *
13						
14						
15						
16						
17						
18						
19						
20						
21						
22						
23						
24						

**TABLE 5A**  
**OBSERVATION OF ON-TASK AND OFF-TASK BEHAVIOR**  
**(WITH PROMPT)**

ROW 1	ROW 2	ROW 3	ROW 4
STUDENT 1 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 7 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 13 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 19 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:
STUDENT 2 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 8 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 14 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 20 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:
STUDENT 3 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 9 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 15 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 21 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:
STUDENT 4 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 10 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 16 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 22 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:
STUDENT 5 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 11 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 17 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 23 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:
STUDENT 6 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 12 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 18 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 24 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:

**TABLE 5B**  
**OBSERVATION OF ON-TASK AND OFF-TASK BEHAVIOR**  
**(WITHOUT PROMPT)**

ROW 1	ROW 2	ROW 3	ROW 4
STUDENT 1 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 7 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 13 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 19 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:
STUDENT 2 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 8 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 14 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 20 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:
STUDENT 3 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 9 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 15 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 21 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:
STUDENT 4 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 10 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 16 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 22 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:
STUDENT 5 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 11 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 17 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 23 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:
STUDENT 6 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 12 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 18 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:	STUDENT 24 ON-TASK: OFF-TASK:

**TABLE 6**  
**STUDENT INTERVIEWS**

Questions:

1. Which pre-writing approach did you prefer? Why?
2. Do you think you are a good writer? Why/Why not?
3. Do you like to write? Why/Why not?



STUDENT	QUESTION 1		QUESTION 2		QUESTION 3		COMMENTS
	PROMPT	NO PROMPT	YES	NO	YES	NO	
1							1. 2. 3.
2							1. 2. 3.
3							1. 2. 3.
4							1. 2. 3.

STUDENT	QUESTION 1		QUESTION 2		QUESTION 3		COMMENTS
	PROMPT	NO PROMPT	YES	NO	YES	NO	
5							1. 2. 3.
6							1. 2. 3.
7							1. 2. 3.
8							1. 2. 3.

STUDENT	QUESTION 1		QUESTION 2		QUESTION 3		COMMENTS
	PROMPT	NO PROMPT	YES	NO	YES	NO	
9							1. 2. 3.
10							1. 2. 3.
11							1. 2. 3.
12							1. 2. 3.

STUDENT	QUESTION 1		QUESTION 2		QUESTION 3		COMMENTS
	PROMPT	NO PROMPT	YES	NO	YES	NO	
13							1. 2. 3.
14							1. 2. 3.
15							1. 2. 3.
16							1. 2. 3.

STUDENT	QUESTION 1		QUESTION 2		QUESTION 3		COMMENTS
	PROMPT	NO PROMPT	YES	NO	YES	NO	
17							1. 2. 3.
18							1. 2. 3.
19							1. 2. 3.
20							1. 2. 3.

STUDENT	QUESTION 1		QUESTION 2		QUESTION 3		COMMENTS
	PROMPT	NO PROMPT	YES	NO	YES	NO	
21							1. 2. 3.
22							1. 2. 3.
23							1. 2. 3.
24							1. 2. 3.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### Presentation of the Results

The results of the final project are presented in three categories:

"Student Writing Sample Analysis," "Observation of On-task and Off-task Behavior," and "Student Interviews."

Within the category of "Student Writing Sample Analysis," the writer collected empirical data concerning the total number words written (Appendix A) and the total number of invented spellings attempted (Appendix B) by each student in response to each pre-writing approach. This data was compiled to provide an indication of the quantitative value of each pre-writing approach. As a whole, the students participating in the study wrote 1,349 words and attempted 482 invented spellings in response to the prompt pre-writing approach. Conversely, the same students wrote a total of 1,163 words and attempted 401 invented spellings in response to the no prompt pre-writing approach. Given that 24 students participated in this study, each student, on average, wrote 56 words and attempted 20 invented spellings in response to the prompt pre-writing approach, and wrote 48 words and attempted 17 invented spellings in response to the no prompt pre-writing approach. 14 of the 24 students (or 58%) wrote more words in response to the prompt pre-writing approach than the no prompt pre-writing approach. 16 of

the 24 students (or 67%) attempted more invented spellings in response to the prompt pre-writing approach than the no prompt pre-writing approach.

Also within the category of "Student Writing Sample Analysis," the writer collected empirical data regarding each students propensity to remain focused on the main topic (Appendix C) and present their ideas in a logical and organized fashion (Appendix D), in response to each pre-writing approach. This data was compiled to provide an indication of the qualitative value of each pre-writing approach. When given a pre-writing prompt, all 24 students remained focused on the topic/main idea during the entire exercise. When given no pre-writing prompt, 15 students remained focused during the entire exercise, 7 students remained focused during a portion of the exercise, and 2 students were unable to ever focus their attention. When given a pre-writing prompt, 22 students were able to logically organize their thoughts, and 2 students demonstrated partial organization of thought. When given no pre-writing prompt, 15 students were able to logically organize their thoughts, 6 students demonstrated partial organization of thought, and 3 students demonstrated no logical organization at all.

Within the category of "Observation of On-task and Off-task Behavior," the writer collected data indicative of the percentage of time each student spent "On-task," and "Off-task," in response to each pre-writing approach (Appendix E). During that portion of the exercise in which the students were given a prompt, a third party observer recorded a total of 134 observations of



student behavior, indicating in each case whether a particular student was "On-task" or "Off-task." During this portion of the exercise, the observer recorded 101 observations of "On-task" behavior and 33 observations of "Off-task" behavior. During that portion of the exercise in which students were not given a pre-writing prompt, the same third party observer recorded a total of 149 observations of student behavior, indicating as before, whether a particular student was "On-task" or "Off-task. During this portion of the exercise, the observer recorded 115 observations of "On-task" behavior and 34 observations of "Off-task" behavior.

Within the category of "Student Interviews," the writer recorded student responses to three post-exercise questions (Appendix F). In response to the question, "Which pre-writing approach did you prefer," 13 students indicated a decided preference toward the prompt pre-writing approach, and 11 students indicated a decided preference toward the no prompt pre-writing approach. All students interviewed by the writer reported that they both enjoy writing, and see themselves as good writers.

## **Discussion of the Results**

This discussion will approach the interpretation of the above presented results from two perspectives: First, the results will be discussed in an objective sense, in an interpretation of the numerical data already presented. Second, the results will be discussed in a subjective sense, in that the writer

will attempt to draw conclusions from the numerical data and the responses given during the student interviews.

All things being equal, the more words written by a student during a given writing exercise, the better. 58% of the students participating in this project wrote more words when given a pre-writing prompt, than without. On average, the students wrote 14% more words when given a pre-writing prompt. This data would tend to indicate that first grade students will produce greater quantity in their writing samples when given a pre-writing prompt. It is the writer's belief that this disparity results from a tendency on the part of the students to spend more time formulating a story line and less time actually writing, when not given a pre-writing prompt. Additionally, it has been the writer's experience that some first grade students, regardless of the time allotted, are unable or unwilling to create their own story line.

All things being equal, the more invented spellings attempted by a student during a writing exercise, the better. 67% of the students participating in this project attempted more invented spellings when given a pre-writing prompt. This data indicates that first grade students are more willing to attempt invented spellings when given a pre-writing prompt. It is the writer's belief that without a pre-writing prompt to guide them, the students will purposefully narrow the scope of their work to encompass only those ideas and words with which they are already familiar. By providing the students with a pre-writing prompt, the teacher is able to coax the students to

experiment with invented spellings and delve into areas with which they are not as familiar.

It is logical to assume that the more focused a student remains on the main topic or subject of his/her work, the more organized and directed that work product will be. During this project, 38% of the students participating were better able to remain focused on the topic/main idea for the duration of the exercise when given a pre-writing prompt. 29% of the students participating were better able to organize their thoughts in a logically sequential order when given a pre-writing prompt. It is the writer's belief that without structured direction, a first grade student's relatively brief attention span will cause the student to jump from one idea to the next without any thought as to a recurrent theme or logical progression. Giving first grade students a pre-writing prompt helps them focus their thoughts and energies toward a specific goal.

All things being equal, the more time a student spends "On-task," the better will his/her work product be. When given a pre-writing prompt, the students participating in this project spent 75% of their allotted time, on average, "On-task." Without a pre-writing prompt, these same students spent 77% of their allotted time, on average, "On-task." Given that each writing session was fifteen minutes in length, 2% of the total time allotted represents just 18 seconds. This minute disparity between the effect of the two approaches utilized indicates that the pre-writing approach itself had little if

any effect on the amount of time the students spent "On-task." It is the writer's belief that some students, when given a pre-writing prompt, will spend less of their allotted time deciding about what to write, and more time actually writing. It is also the writer's belief that when some students are permitted to write about that which is most meaningful to them, and about which they have the most knowledge, they will spend a greater percentage of time "On-task." The data presented above indicates that the group of students participating in this project were equally divided between these two groups.

When asked which pre-writing approach the participating students preferred, 54% of these students expressed a preference for the prompt pre-writing approach. Selected comments made by these students are as follows:

- "It was easier to write."
- "I don't know what to write."
- "You started it for me."
- "Because you didn't have to think of how to begin."
- "I could think of it (what to write) faster."
- "Because I like hearing the story."

46% of the students interviewed expressed a preference for the no prompt pre-writing approach. Selected comments made by these students are as follows:

- "I can write about anything that no one else knows about."
- "It is more fun."
- "I knew I could get more done and write more things."
- "We can write about anything we want."
- "We can't do anything else because you gave us the story."

Once again, the participating students were split almost exactly in half on this issue. From these responses, the writer has learned that students who

prefer a prompt pre-writing approach do so because of the guidance and direction it provides. Students who prefer the no prompt pre-writing approach appear to do so because it affords them more freedom of expression.

It is the writer's belief that while there may be a specific pre-writing approach that would draw the best results from each individual student, it is obvious from the responses presented above that a classroom teacher who does not have the luxury of tailoring his/her writing program to one particular student, would be well advised to utilize more than one kind of pre-writing approach in an effort to meet the needs of the entire class.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary

Because first grade students are regarded as emergent writers, a first grade teacher has a responsibility to help his/her students see themselves as writers, and a responsibility to help build their self-confidence. A teacher needs to provide an environment that is rich in content and then prompt the students to explore new ideas through writing (Staab and Smith, 1985).

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the written composition skills exhibited, as well as the verbal and non-verbal behavior, of first grade students in response to two different pre-writing approaches. The study was conducted with 24 first grade students who live and attend school in a suburban setting. These students participated in two 15-minute writing sessions. During the first session, the writer gave the students a pre-writing prompt, and instructed them to write only about the prompt. For the second 15-minute writing session, the writer instructed the students to write about anything they chose. Data was collected by gathering and analyzing student writing samples, making observations of student behavior, and conducting semi-structured post-writing interviews.

The results of this project show that students wrote more words, attempted more invented spellings, and wrote in a more logical and sequential manner when given a prompt as a pre-writing approach.

However, when the students were asked which pre-writing approach they preferred, the class was almost equally split between the two approaches. All of the students who participated in the study stated that they enjoy writing, and view themselves as good writers.

## Conclusions

Much of the current research regarding emergent writers indicates that students should be allowed to choose writing topics that are meaningful to them. The justification for this approach is purported to be that students will be motivated to write, and as a result, produce a better composition.

However, this study suggests that there may be times when a more structured writing lesson is appropriate. An educator must keep in mind the various needs, learning styles, learning abilities, and individual backgrounds of all students in a particular class. While a particular writing approach may be effective for one student, it may just as easily be ineffective for another. A rather simple and effective technique for determining which approaches students prefer, is to ask them. Student feedback not only helps a teacher better understand the individual needs of his/her students, it helps a teacher plan future writing lessons.

## **Recommendations**

The writer suggests that educators utilize a number of different methods for teaching writing skills. These methods could be all or any of the following techniques:

- student journals
- classroom writing center
- publishing stories
- story starters
- student writing folders
- student portfolios
- content area writing
- literature extension activities

Student interviews will provide valuable insight as to which methods are most effective in meeting individual student learning styles. Educators should also make an effort to stay abreast of current methods of assessment and evaluation. A teacher must continually experiment with the different types of assessment available until he or she finds one or one combination that is most effective and practical for use in his/her own classroom.



## APPENDIX A

TABLE 1

### STUDENT WRITING SAMPLE ANALYSIS TOTAL NUMBER OF WORDS

STUDENT	PROMPT	NO PROMPT	GAIN/LOSS
1	61	41	+20
2	35	31	+4
3	40	46	- 6
4	58	17	+41
5	57	51	+6
6	71	84	- 13
7	52	28	+24
8	53	41	+12
9	68	44	+24
10	47	78	-31
11	71	54	+17
12	51	18	+33

**TABLE 1 CONTINUED**

**STUDENT WRITING SAMPLE ANALYSIS**

**TOTAL NUMBER OF WORDS**

STUDENT	PROMPT	NO PROMPT	GAIN/LOSS
13	12	31	- 19
14	67	27	+40
15	111	43	+68
16	126	84	+4
17	31	55	-24
18	82	60	+22
19	32	48	- 16
20	26	31	- 5
21	59	49	+10
22	36	74	- 38
23	77	78	- 1
24	26	50	- 24

## APPENDIX B

TABLE 2

### STUDENT WRITING SAMPLE ANALYSIS TOTAL NUMBER OF INVENTED SPELLINGS

STUDENT	PROMPT	NO PROMPT	GAIN/LOSS
1	7	3	+4
2	20	11	+9
3	13	24	- 11
4	15	5	+10
5	14	11	+3
6	10	13	- 3
7	31	16	+15
8	22	17	+5
9	24	21	+3
10	25	32	- 7
11	49	40	+9
12	20	3	+17

**TABLE 2 CONTINUED**

**STUDENT WRITING SAMPLE ANALYSIS  
TOTAL NUMBER OF INVENTED SPELLINGS**

STUDENT	PROMPT	NO PROMPT	GAIN/LOSS
13	5	9	- 4
14	24	7	+17
15	39	16	+23
16	41	36	+5
17	11	2	+9
18	22	14	+8
19	13	12	+1
20	13	12	+1
21	13	7	+6
22	17	38	- 21
23	24	37	- 13
24	10	15	- 5

**APPENDIX C**  
**TABLE 3**  
**WRITING SAMPLE ANALYSIS**  
**REMAINS FOCUSED ON TOPIC/MAIN IDEA**  
**(A - Always; O - Occasionally; N - Never)**

STUDENT	PROMPT			NO PROMPT		
	A*	O*	N*	A*	O*	N*
1	√			√		
2	√			√		
3	√			√		
4	√			√		
5	√				√	
6	√				√	
7	√			√		
8	√			√		
9	√			√		
10	√			√		
11	√			√		
12	√				√	

TABLE 3 CONTINUED

**WRITING SAMPLE ANALYSIS  
REMAINS FOCUSED ON TOPIC/MAIN IDEA  
(A - Always; O - Occasionally; N - Never)**

STUDENT	PROMPT			NO PROMPT		
	A *	O *	N *	A *	O *	N *
13	√			√		
14	√				√	
15	√			√		
16	√			√		
17	√					√
18	√				√	
19	√			√		
20	√			√		
21	√				√	
22	√				√	
23	√			√		
24	√					√

**APPENDIX D**  
**TABLE 4**  
**WRITING SAMPLE ANALYSIS**  
**ORGANIZED (LOGICAL SEQUENCE)**  
**(A - Always; O - Occasionally; N - Never)**

STUDENT	PROMPT			NO PROMPT		
	A*	O*	N*	A*	O*	N*
1	√			√		
2	√			√		
3	√			√		
4	√			√		
5	√				√	
6	√				√	
7	√			√		
8	√			√		
9	√			√		
10	√			√		
11	√			√		
12	√					√

TABLE 4 CONTINUED

WRITING SAMPLE ANALYSIS  
ORGANIZED (LOGICAL SEQUENCE)  
(A - Always; O - Occasionally; N - Never)

STUDENT	PROMPT			NO PROMPT		
	A*	O*	N*	A*	O*	N*
13	✓			✓		
14	✓				✓	
15	✓			✓		
16	✓			✓		
17	✓					✓
18		✓			✓	
19	✓			✓		
20	✓			✓		
21	✓				✓	
22	✓				✓	
23	✓			✓		
24		✓				✓



**APPENDIX E: TABLE 5A**  
**OBSERVATION OF ON-TASK AND OFF-TASK BEHAVIOR**  
**(WITH PROMPT)**

ROW 1	ROW 2	ROW 3	ROW 4
STUDENT 1 ON-TASK: 4 OFF-TASK: 1	STUDENT 7 ON-TASK: 5 OFF-TASK: 1	STUDENT 13 ON-TASK: 1 OFF-TASK: 4	STUDENT 19 ON-TASK: 2 OFF-TASK: 3
STUDENT 2 ON-TASK: 4 OFF-TASK: 2	STUDENT 8 ON-TASK: 3 OFF-TASK: 3	STUDENT 14 ON-TASK: 5 OFF-TASK: 0	STUDENT 20 ON-TASK: 0 OFF-TASK: 5
STUDENT 3 ON-TASK: 4 OFF-TASK: 2	STUDENT 9 ON-TASK: 6 OFF-TASK: 0	STUDENT 15 ON-TASK: 5 OFF-TASK: 0	STUDENT 21 ON-TASK: 5 OFF-TASK: 0
STUDENT 4 ON-TASK: 4 OFF-TASK: 2	STUDENT 10 ON-TASK: 6 OFF-TASK: 0	STUDENT 16 ON-TASK: 5 OFF-TASK: 0	STUDENT 22 ON-TASK: 2 OFF-TASK: 4
STUDENT 5 ON-TASK: 6 OFF-TASK: 0	STUDENT 11 ON-TASK: 3 OFF-TASK: 3	STUDENT 17 ON-TASK: 4 OFF-TASK: 2	STUDENT 23 ON-TASK: 5 OFF-TASK: 0
STUDENT 6 ON-TASK: 6 OFF-TASK: 0	STUDENT 12 ON-TASK: 4 OFF-TASK: 2	STUDENT 18 ON-TASK: 5 OFF-TASK: 0	STUDENT 24 ON-TASK: 4 OFF-TASK: 1

**APPENDIX E: TABLE 5B**  
**OBSERVATION OF ON-TASK AND OFF-TASK BEHAVIOR**  
**(WITHOUT PROMPT)**

**ROW 1**

**ROW 2**

**ROW 3**

**ROW 4**

STUDENT 1 ON-TASK: 7 OFF-TASK: 0	STUDENT 7 ON-TASK: 6 OFF-TASK: 0	STUDENT 13 ON-TASK: 6 OFF-TASK: 0	STUDENT 19 ON-TASK: 4 OFF-TASK: 2
STUDENT 2 ON-TASK: 6 OFF-TASK: 1	STUDENT 8 ON-TASK: 5 OFF-TASK: 1	STUDENT 14 ON-TASK: 2 OFF-TASK: 5	STUDENT 20 ON-TASK: 2 OFF-TASK: 4
STUDENT 3 ON-TASK: 5 OFF-TASK: 2	STUDENT 9 ON-TASK: 6 OFF-TASK: 0	STUDENT 15 ON-TASK: 6 OFF-TASK: 0	STUDENT 21 ON-TASK: 5 OFF-TASK: 1
STUDENT 4 ON-TASK: 3 OFF-TASK: 3	STUDENT 10 ON-TASK: 5 OFF-TASK: 1	STUDENT 16 ON-TASK: 5 OFF-TASK: 1	STUDENT 22 ON-TASK: 5 OFF-TASK: 1
STUDENT 5 ON-TASK: 6 OFF-TASK: 0	STUDENT 11 ON-TASK: 4 OFF-TASK: 2	STUDENT 17 ON-TASK: 5 OFF-TASK: 1	STUDENT 23 ON-TASK: 5 OFF-TASK: 2
STUDENT 6 ON-TASK: 5 OFF-TASK: 1	STUDENT 12 ON-TASK: 4 OFF-TASK: 3	STUDENT 18 ON-TASK: 4 OFF-TASK: 2	STUDENT 24 ON-TASK: 5 OFF-TASK: 1

## **APPENDIX F**

### **TABLE 6**

#### **STUDENT INTERVIEWS**

**Questions:**

1. Which pre-writing approach did you prefer? Why?
2. Do you think you are a good writer? Why/Why not?
3. Do you like to write? Why/Why not?

STUDENT	QUESTION 1		QUESTION 2		QUESTION 3		COMMENTS
	PROMPT	NO PROMPT	YES	NO	YES	NO	
1		√	√		√		1. I can write about anything that no one else knows about. 2. I know a lot of words. 3. I can write about anything.
2	√		√		√		1. It had my name on the box. 2. I color good. 3. I can learn.
3		√	√		√		1. It is more fun. 2. I don't know. 3. I don't know.
4	√		√		√		1. It is more fun. 2. I can spell. 3. It is fun to write.

STUDENT	QUESTION 1		QUESTION 2		QUESTION 3		COMMENTS
	PROMPT	NO PROMPT	YES	NO	YES	NO	
5	√		√		√		1. It was easier to write. 2. I can write words. 3. You can think of anything and write it down.
6		√	√		√		1. I know it. 2. I write stories a lot. 3. I get to write stories and stuff.
7		√	√		√		1. I can make up my own story about penguins. 2. I practice at my house. 3. You can write a story on anything you want.
8		√	√		√		1. I knew I could get more done and write more things. 2. I write a lot. 3. I like illustrating and publishing.

STUDENT	QUESTION 1		QUESTION 2		QUESTION 3		COMMENTS
	PROMPT	NO PROMPT	YES	NO	YES	NO	
9	√		√		√		1. I don't know what to write. 2. I don't know. 3. It's fun.
10	√		√		√		1. I started the story for her. 2. I can sound out words. 3. I can write anything.
11	√		√		√		1. You started it for me. 2. I practice a lot. 3. It is fun.
12		√	√		√		1. We can think of anything to write. 2. I don't know. 3. Because it is fun and you can write about anything.

STUDENT	QUESTION 1		QUESTION 2		QUESTION 3		COMMENTS
	PROMPT	NO PROMPT	YES	NO	YES	NO	
13	√		√		√		1. Because you didn't have to think of how to begin. 2. I write neatly. 3. I make all kinds of stories and spell a lot.
14	√		√		√		1. Because then we had a start. 2. Because I've been practicing at home and watching my sister. 3. Because you get to get better.
15	√		√		√		1. I could think of it faster. 2. I take my time. 3. I think it's fun.
16		√	√		√		1. We can write about anything we want. 2. I can guess spell. 3. It's fun.

STUDENT	QUESTION 1		QUESTION 2		QUESTION 3		COMMENTS
	PROMPT	NO PROMPT	YES	NO	YES	NO	
17		√	√		√		1. I like my drawing. 2. I write good. 3. I like to write my name.
18		√	√		√		1. Because you get to make your own stories. 2. I make my letters nice. 3. Because I can write notes to people.
19		√	√		√		1. Because you could write about anything. 2. I have a sharp pencil. 3. Because it's fun.
20	√		√		√		1. Because I don't have to write as much. 2. I practice the letters. 3. I don't know.



STUDENT	QUESTION 1		QUESTION 2		QUESTION 3		COMMENTS
	PROMPT	NO PROMPT	YES	NO	YES	NO	
21	√		√		√		1. Because I like hearing the story. 2. Everyone tells me I am. 3. It's fun.
22	√		√		√		1. I like writing. 2. I write straight. 3. I don't know.
23	√		√		√		1. You can get a better start. 2. Because I write the way I'm supposed to. 3. I like to write stories and stuff.
24		√	√		√		1. We can't do anything else because you gave us the story. 2. I write a lot. 3. I can write to my friends.

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